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Martin Luther King Jr. Prayer Breakfast: Justice for All

01.22.2009 | Culture and Society, Campus and Community

As faculty, staff and students gathered for the Martin Luther King Jr. prayer breakfast Jan. 20, conversations throughout the Kennedy Union ballroom were focused both backward and forward — on the late civil rights icon and on what student Bernard Jones (url: http://campusreport.udayton.edu/News_Digest_Article/?contentId=22497) called "the fulfillment of the hope of the civil rights movement" — the inauguration of the nation's first black president.

In exclamations that ranged from marvel to praise, the community affirmed progress, expressed hope and answered the challenge posed by activist, author and political hopeful Kevin Powell, the event's keynote speaker: to study the past, to give honor to the work of civil rights pioneers, and to continue in the pursuit of civil, social and economic justice for all.

Jones, a first-year sociology major, reminded his fellow students that they have the power to make a difference, for it was college-age students who drove the civil rights movement. In her poem "The Wall," junior English major Kondwani Harawa (url: http://campusreport.udayton.edu/News_Digest_Article/?contentId=22467) shared her perception of racial barriers that remain today and the attempts society has made at remedies.

Powell asked the audience to model King's servant leadership and to know and understand his words — all of them, not just the sound bites from his most famous speeches.

King was a model of servant leadership, Powell said. When he was in college, he looked to Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent approach to opposing British colonialism in India, and he adapted those teachings for the struggle for basic rights for all people in America. As such, Powell asked students to be committed to purpose, not to self: "When (King) did win that Nobel Peace Prize, he was so conscious as a leader and as a servant of God of being accused of profiting off the people that he gave every dime of that award to the movement."

Barack Obama's election does not mean we are in a post-racial America, as some have suggested, Powell said.

"Racism is not over in this country," he said. "Racism is not over when we have folks lining our borders and purposely shooting at Mexican folks trying to come into the country. Racism is not over when you still have folks in 2009 who call someone an Indian giver when they ask for something back. ... Racism is not going to end unless we become so intellectually and spiritually curious that we begin to root out racism, sexism, patriarchy and misogyny."

In pursuit of justice, much work remains, Powell said.

"What are we doing?" he asked. "We can sit on a bus now, but what if we don't have the money to get on the bus? We can go into the restaurant now, but what if we don't have the money to buy a hamburger. ... What we need to start talking about now is economic justice."

Part of the work for economic justice will require a new selflessness, a conversion from being "thing-oriented" to being "people-oriented," Powell said.

"What did Dr. King say in that speech?" he asked. "We need a radical revolution of values. He was saying what Barack Obama's been saying for the past few years: We need change. We need to be born again. ... For him, being born again meant that we had to talk about economic injustice. ... That's why he began to say we need to have a poor people's campaign — not a poor black people's campaign, not a poor white people's campaign, but poor people of all different backgrounds, folks who are struggling."

Powell also encouraged students to develop as virtuous leaders — a value UD holds dear.

"Every one of you in this room has the potential to be an incredible leader," he said. "What I'm saying is be a leader in your family, volunteering in your community, doing something for the less fortunate in your community. We should not have to be told around Thanksgiving and around the holiday season and on King Day to volunteer. It should be part of your value system."

To truly lead, he said, we must see one another as equals. We must, as a culture, see every job as dignified. We must turn mere tolerance into respect. And we must, he said, respect the humanity of all people.